DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 247 056 RC 014 839

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TITLE Indian Self-Determination and Education: Kickapoo Nation School.
PUB DATE 17 Nov 83
NOTE 14p.; Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (82nd, Chicago, IL, November 17, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS American Indian Culture; *American Indian Education; American Indians; Culture Conflict; *Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Federal Indian Relationship; *Self Determination; *Tribal Sovereignty; Tribes; Trust Responsibility (Government)
IDENTIFIERS Indian Self Determination Education Assistance Act; *Kickapoo (Tribe); *Kickapoo Nation School KS

ABSTRACT

Kickapoo Nation School, a tribally controlled K-grade 12 school, owned and administered by the Kickapoo Tribe in Kansas since 1981, is examined as a case study of the implementation of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 (P.L. 93-638). The tribal school, viewed as a reflection of the tribe's ongoing goal of self determination and sovereignty, is a major shift in the control tribes are given in education for Indians. Because it has had the intention of assimilating Indians to the ways of the dominant society, Indian education from its incipience has differed from other education in America in its content, intent, methods, and development. The changes in federal Indian policy resulting from P.L. 93-638, along with increasingly negative sentiment in the local community of whites toward a growing proportion of Indian students, created the time and circumstances for the Kickapoo tribal school. Even though the Kickapoo school is controlled by the tribe, Bureau of Indian Affairs regulations, the issue of state accreditation, and the need for offering basic educational skills for functioning in the dominant society often conflict with community values and culturally relevant education. Thus, the incompatibility of externally imposed restrictions and tribally-oriented values in education remains. (NEC)

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INDIAN SELF-DETERMINATION AND EDUCATION: KICKAPOO NATION SCHOOL

A paper presented at the 82nd Annual Meeting
of the American Anthropological Association
November 17, 1983
Chicago, Illinois

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ABSTRACT

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INDIAN SELF-DETERMINATION AND EDUCATION: KICKAPOO NATION SCHOOL

Kickapoo Nation School, a recently formed, tribally controlled school, owned and administered by the Kickapoo Tribe in Kansas, is examined as a case study of the implementation of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975. The tribal school, viewed as a reflection of the Tribe's ongoing goal of self-determination and sovereignty, represents a major shift in the control tribes are given in education for Indians. This paper assesses the extent to which the Self-Determination Act has provided the basis for a departure from the previous model of federal domination over the aim and content of Indian education.

There are one and a half million American Indians living in the United States according to the 1980 census; half of them reside on reservations. There are about 413,000 Indian children enrolled in elementary and secondary grades. Unlike non-reservation children who attend mainly public schools, Indian children from reservations are served by several other types of schools: boarding schools, mission or church schools, Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, and different kinds of Indian-controlled schools. One kind of an Indian-controlled school is an Indian contract school, a recent development in the evolution of Indian education. This paper will discuss Kickapoo Nation School, an example of a tribal "contract" school that operates under the provisions of Public Law 93-638, the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975.

Indian "self-determination" is the buzzword for the rights guaranteed to Indians in the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975, hereafter referred to as P.L. 93-638. Indian self-determination is the federal policy of the 1970s that opens channels for tribal control of programs and services for Indians by means of administering their own grants and contracts. Under the rubric of P.L. 93-638 is the provision for Indians to contract for their own educational services and to operate their own schools if they so choose. A contract school is a school that is controlled, administered, and operated by an Indian tribe or recognized Indian organization such as a school

board. This is quite a change in the delivery of Indian education and is one that has developed rather recently--within the last eight years. Since P.L. 93-638 has been enacted, there have been only 63 contract schools.

Indian contract schools, manifestations of the broader move to Indian self-determination, are viewed by Indians as a critical point of departure. When Indians can control their own educational processes, total self-determination becomes closer to realization. The Kickapoo Tribe in Kansas holds this belief, one which has compelled the tribe to gain control over their children's education.

After a long and complicated struggle, the Kickapoo Tribe obtained the facilities of a former public school, and by contracting with the BIA under the provisions of P.L. 93-638, opened Kickapoo Nation School in 1981. This discussion reviews the factors that led to the formation of this particular contract school, the focus of two and a half years of fieldwork by this author. The data were accumulated by participant observation while I worked as a tribal planner at the school and through open-ended interviews conducted with individuals who were involved in the acquisition of the school.

First, it is important to understand something about the overall state and development of Indian education in general and the Kickapoo Tribe in particular. From its beginning, Indian education has differed from the rest of American education. This

is a result of the unique historical developments between the U.S. government and Indian tribes.

Following the British poliicy of dealing with tribes as separate nations, treaties with the American government promised Indians certain rights and services, including education, in exchange for their land. Because of this treaty relationship, Indians have a special and unique trust relationship with the U.S. government; it is unlike any other group's relationship with the U.S. government.

Indian education has been, from its incipience, more than just education of Indians. Because it has had the intention of assimilating Indians to the ways of the dominant society, Indian education has differed from other education in America in its content, intent, methods, and development. For the first one hundred years, the American government's responsibility for Indian education was relegated to religious groups. These groups were primarily interested in converting rather than educating Indians. By the late 1800s, after much debate and criticism between religious and political groups, the federal government began to contract with states to provide education for Indians, eventually terminating federal support to mission groups, passing this responsibility to individual states. There was also a shift to boarding schools at this time; it was hoped that removing Indian children from their home environments would accelerate the process of assimilation to white society. In the 1930s, there was

another major shift, this time to put education of Indians in the hands of public schools. Today, the vast majority of Indian children continue to attend public schools. However, in the last decade, a new and growing form of education has emerged--the contract school. For the first time in over four centuries, Indians have the opportunity to control their own education. The Kickapoo Tribe is one of the tribes at the forefront of this movement.

The Kickapoo Tribe in Kansas is one of four small federally recognized Indian tribes in the state of Kansas. The tribe has a five by six mile reservation in Brown County, in northeast Kansas. There are about 600 Indians living on the reservation today. The Kickapoo, an Eastern woodlands tribe of the Algonquian language family, were removed from their historic homeland in the Great Lakes area around Michigan and Ohio in the 1830s to northeastern Kansas. They have lived on the same reservation land for the past 150 years.

Beginning in the 1960s, the tribe began a remarkable effort in progressing toward tribal self-determination and economic self-sufficiency on the reservation. This resulted in the purchase of a tribal farm and ranch enterprise, purchase of former tribal land, construction of a swimming pool, gymnasium, day care center, senior citizens complex, water treatment system, numerous new homes, and tribal printing operation, and the acquisition of the tribal school. The tribe has a reputation in

the Indian world as a progressive, persistent tribe that is relatively well-adapted to the ways of the non-Indian world, especially in effectively tapping federal and state resources and program funding. It is no small feat that a tribe as small as the Kickapoo, with no natural resources, only human resources, has acquired and controls its own school.

The reservation's development in socioeconomic terms has been successful and is reflected by a significant population increase in the last ten years. This is directly linked to the increase in jobs and availability of adequate housing. These factors also play an important part in the process of the tribal school's formation.

Education among the Kickapoo paralleled the national trends. For the Kickapoo, the change to public education came in the 1950s when the federally operated reservation and boarding schools closed. Students were sent to local public schools; the most common of these was Powhattan School located in Powhattan, Kansas, a small farm town adjacent to the reservation.

The aforementioned economic growth on the reservation in the 1970s resulted in a rapid increase of Indians on the reservation. Powhattan school, which was predominantly a white school with about 10-15% Indian enrollment in the early 1970s, had an equaly rapid increase in Indian students. By the mid to late 1970s, Indian enrollment had climbed to about 70%. Powhattan school was a predominantly Indian school in terms of enrollment; however,

the school was still administered, operated, and staffed by non-Indians. There were only one or two Indian parents on the school board at any time and the amount of Indian influence over educational services for Indian students was not representative of the number or interest of the Indian students.

Indian parents were not totally excluded from participation in their children's education, however. As a result of regulations accompanying program funding under certain laws, advisory committees of parents of Indian students were established to monitor and direct supplementary Indian education programs. Although there were provisions for parent involvement, the participation was limited to advisory actions. The committees only made suggestions for a specific program, not the general curriculum or overall teaching methods that their children encountered daily.

P.L. 93-638 reaffirmed the right of Indians to participate in the educational processes of their children. It is pursuant to this act that tribes now have the legislative vehicle and wherewithal to control their own educational services. Changes in federal Indian policy, along with the changes in the local community, created the time and circumstances for the need and desire for a tribal school. Kickapoo informants point out that the most important contributing factor at the community level was the increasingly negative sentiment of whites toward the growing proportion of Indian students as Powhattan. More and more,

parents of white children withdrew their children from Powhattan and enrolled them in nearby predominately white schools. There was also a concurrent influx of Indian students to the school. This "white flight" in response to the growing number of Indian students set the stage for the changeover of the school.

Public hearings were held in response to local dissatisfactions and were well attended by both white parents, who wanted to close the public school, as well as Indian parents who wanted to keep it open. The parents of white students felt the quality of education was low, in part due to problems arising from poor Indian-white relations. Indian parents fought to keep the school open so their children would not have to be bussed to schools farther away. They also felt strongly that the school was "theirs" because of the long tradition of attendance by Indians. The Kickapoo began to realize later that this was not simply the closing of the school, it was an opportunity to obtain and control a school for the tribe.

In August 1980, a voter-initiated referendum questioned whether Powhattan School should be closed. The voters adopted this by a slim majority: 157 for, and 153 against. Powhattan closed in May 1981. The tribe scrambled to get authorization and funding to open the tribal school and it was uncertain until the last moment whether the opening of the tribal school would be realized.

Kickapoo Nation School opened in August 1981 with an

enrollment of 105 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. The school has been open since then, but it has not been without its problems. There have been four superintendents and three school boards since it opened. Finding certified teachers with experience working with Indians has been difficult. Enrollment this year has dropped significantly. Problems are complex and involve both internal and external pressures.

Control of education is not to be equated with tribal self-determination; it is but one small step. Control of the school is not a panacea and has not led to immediate achievement of self-determination nor a complete restructuring of Indian education. In 1983, the school is struggling to survive; in fact, it is unclear if the school will continue next academic year.

Even though the school is controlled by the tribe, it still operates within certain limitations and restrictions that accompany Bureau programs. Bureau regulations, the issue of state accreditation, and the need for offering basic educational skills for functioning in the dominant society often conflict with community values and culturally relevant education. Since the tribe has obtained school control, the school has had more freedom to offer education that is appropriate for a tribal society. For example, the school has a tribal studies program that uses a text book (written by Donald D. Stull, University of Kansas) specifically for that course that includes Kickapoo history and tribal government. In addition, there is a native

language course planned for next year. However, the incompatibility of externally imposed restrictions and tribally-oriented values in education remains. It is important that the Kickapoo, and other tribes as well, recognize the conflicting natures of these forms of education.

One way to examine this fundamental conflict is to use the approach employed by Wax and Wax in their 1971 article called "Great Tradition, Little Tradition, and Formal Education", in which they apply Redfield's models of great tradition and little tradition to Indian education. Indian education has been and is still primarilly modelled after the great tradition and is imparted through the mechanisms of the BIA. However, as in the past, Indian tribes of today live in a world of small, kin-based communities. On Indian reservations, the way of life is that of a little tradition. The values and underlying assumptions about the world differ greatly from those of the great tradition. The tribal society, whose educational goals are focused on community cohesion and maintenance, is in conflict with the great tradition, i.e., the BIA, and its educational system and intentions. The great tradition has little in common with the worldview of a little tradition community. It promotes ideologies and skills that are oriented toward individual benefit rather than the community as a whole. Therefore, education in each has different functions, goals, and methods. The conflict becomes apparent when one is transposed to the other.

Kickapoo Nation School, viewed as an exercise in self-determination, is gradually moving toward a little tradition orientation as the tribe takes control of the education offered there. Self-determination is a deeply ingrained goal of Indian tribes, especially of the Kickapoo. Since education is such a central issue in this process, little tradition communities will have to deal with the dilemma that occurs when a non-tribal structure is imposed upon tribally oriented societies. They must find a way to balance the tendencies of each, to exploit and utilize the best of each, and to adapt to the inevitable conflicts that arise. Without reaching a carefully thought-out equilibrium, "self-determination" could very well be counterproductive, and not just difficult, to achieve.

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